

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS
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USSR/WAR ALERT>BROKAW: It was the joke heard 'round the world, the one by President Reagan about bombing the Soviet Union, and it resulted in a Soviet red alert, and it became a campaign issue in this country. Now, Marvin Kalb has learned that the Soviets responded in their own fashion.

KALB: The president was joking his way through an audio check on August 11. REAGAN (Aug. 11, 1984): I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.

KALB: By Aug. 14, the story became world news, a major item on Moscow television, where the joke was not treated as a laughing matter. Aug. 15, a coded message left Soviet military headquarters in Vladivostok. It said in part, 'We now embark on military action against the U.S. forces.' The code was instantly broken by U.S. and Japanese intelligence. This is what then happened: A special command unit in Ussurijsk went on wartime alert; key Japanese military units raised their readiness status; Soviet naval vessels in the north Pacific, baffled by the order, checked with Vladivostok; confusion; U.S. intelligence urgently canvassed for signs of an imminent Soviet attack, found none. Later, officials of the top-secret National Security Agency briefed Congressman Michael Barnes. MICHAEL BARNES (D-Md.): There was what they described as a wayward operator in the Soviet Far Eastern command, who sent out a message, alerting Soviet forces in that area that a state of war existed between the United States and the Soviet Union.

KALB: Within 30 minutes, the mysterious Soviet alert was cancelled. Was it unusual? Not according to U.S. officials. BARNES: They said it particularly happens on weekends, when discipline is a little less than it might be on weekdays...

KALB: But Aug. 15 was a weekday. One senator said the alert must have been a joke. A congressman said it was Russia's way of answering the president. Most officials had no comment, though one did speculate that the Russian might have been drunk. Marvin Kalb, NBC News, the State Department.